

[George F. Gaynor]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff 19

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Living Folklore

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Subject: Folklore of Communications Karine Radio Operators

Informant: George F. Gaynor Exerpted from Diary of Informant - (continued)

Santo Domingo City -

On August 21, I was transferred to the United States Naval Radio Station at the Capitol. This time making the trip by truck over a road that had recently been constructed by the marines. Arriving at the capitol I joined headquarters company, Second Brigade, assigned to detached duty as first operator. There were two operators to a watch — the second performed the striker duties, such as taking care of the log, polishing the copper spark gaps etc. The station equipment consisted of a 5-kw spark transmitter that had been salvaged from the wreck of the cruiser Memphis, which had piled up on the rocks from a tidal wave in the year 1916.

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There certainly was a great gang of men at this station — the operators were both marines and gobs. When off duty we either gathered together at “John's Place”, a cafe owned by an ex-marine, located next door to the station, or at the “Little Red Shanty” also near the station and within a stone's throw of the wreck of the old Memphis. Two of the gob operators lived in this shanty and in both of these places in our leisure time we drank tiger beer, 2 sang songs and enjoyed many historic parties.

A Naval Lieutenant was officer in charge of the station — none of the operators were very popular with him and as we were usually up to some kind of mischief, whenever he approached the station, somebody always passed the information along by saying, 'Yes, we have no bananas'. This meant that everybody was to quiet down and look busy. We played many jokes on him but he could never definitely pin the trouble on any individual, — consequently he finally shanghaied us one by one. We put rocks in the drawers of his desk, hung tin cans on his coat rack, swept up all kinds of paper and dirt and left it in the telephone booth — sometimes we even carried his office furniture out on the lawn at night, but that joke wasn't so good because we had to carry it back again the next day.

Many of the operators were quartered in a house in the city, which was known as the 'House of Horrors', and it was well named for the type of parties held there. A troupe of Porto Rivan girls staging a show in the city were invited to this house one evening after the performance. All hands secured a partner and the party began, with dancing and drinking. It was a large house with plenty of rooms for all kinds of entertainment. Of course there was a game started to explore the rooms.

A large mess table stretched across the front room near the windows covered with bottles of liquor, brandy and wine, and everybody proceeded to drink himself into the pink of condition. In the wee hours of the morning, the party came to a climax as one 3 man started throwing shole bottles of good liquor through the window panes. Several couples were dancing around, two other men were in another room shooting bottles from the wall with 45's, and other men were off in a corner singing. All this noise had roused the ire of

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the citizens, one of them having reported the disturbance to the marine guard. Soon a troop of mounted MP's were galloping down the street toward the house. In the meantime, however, all those who were able took their leave via the court yard and fences in the rear, and so the great party of the house of horrors came to an abrupt end.

The principal amusement in Santo Domingo was the cock fights. Usually on Sundays they were held and heavy bets were laid down on these little feathered creatures wherever the natives congregated.

A pleasure I enjoyed the most in the city was to go to the open air cafes around the park during the evening, to sip a glass of wine, while the band played and I kept my eyes open for a passing fancy. Just for the fun of it, I bought an outfit of Dominican civilian clothes, white shoes and a large sombrero, for the sum of eleven dollars. Putting the clothes on, I started into town with Clotilda for company. We talked only in Spanish and walked by American MP's who didn't know but what we were just another couple of spicks. It was lots of fun, but if I had been caught it would have meant a general court martial due to the fact that in a foreign country on active service, it is against regulations to wear civilian clothes.

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On November 1, I was again appointed to the rank of Corporal, and on November 21, transferred to Santiago, known as the 'City of Gentlemen'. Arriving at Santiago, Jerry, Frenchy and myself joined headquarters company, Fourth Regiment and were assigned to detached duty at the radio station, 'MV', up on Radio Hill. Now that I was at a new station I decided to leave the liquor alone, and turn over a new leaf. My first move in this direction was to start every morning on long hikes into the interior. From Radio Hill there were trails that led in all directions on into the jungle, and these hikes alone often brought me face to face with groups of natives, who were no doubt fomenting trouble. They would at first eye me suspiciously, but when I hailed them in a friendly way and they saw I carried no sidearms, they passed the time of day and I continued on my way. Sometimes I passed little straw huts, often stopping to chat with the occupants as I became better

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acquainted from seeing them every day. Occasionally I brought candy along for the little black urchins, who at first ran and hid on seeing the strange white man their little minds couldn't understand.

During our stay at Santiago, we often experienced slight earth tremors that would make our bunks quiver and shake, and in December a strong wind struck the hill and swept everything before it. Happening at night, I just had time to grab my mattress, roll off the top of the hill and, holding the mattress as a shield, protected myself from rocks and flying debris. The following morning the detachment had to be supplied with new outfits and 5 equipment as practically everything had been destroyed during the storm.

Following the storm, we began to have trouble trying to catch a native who each night would steal a pair of our shoes while we slept. Altogether there were 32 pairs of shoes missing before we caught up with him. Each night a man would stay awake to watch for him, but evidently fell asleep just before dawn, and this was just the time the native silently crept in one of the tents and took the precious footwear. This state of affairs continued for some time, until one night, one of the men crept to a position just below the top of the hill. At dawn the following morning, we were aroused suddenly from sleep to hear the sound of a rifle bullet, 'ping', singing through the air. With that sound, sixteen men jumped out of their bunks, grabbed rifles and let the native have it. In the early morning those sixteen rifles made a terrific racket. Within a few minutes the hospital detachment called on the field telephone, as well as battalion and regimental headquarters, wanting to know what the trouble was, and how many were injured. The native was injured, but made his get-away. That same afternoon, a Lieutenant from headquarters came up on the hill to investigate and on finding out what had happened, he said, I don't care how many you kill, but do it quietly. There are diplomatic negotiations underway between the United States Government and the Dominican Republic to turn the government over to the Dominicans, and all the noise we had made could very easily stir up trouble.

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It was customary during the heat of the afternoon to lay on our bunks stripped to our underwear, to enjoy a quiet siesta. One afternoon while asleep, I was suddenly awakened by being struck with the flat side of a bayonet. Jumping to the floor I was faced by one of the marines of our own detachment who had gone crazy from too much sun and whiskey. He had in his hand a bayonet and said I'm going to cut your guts out. Fully awake now, I could feel my stomach turning around inside. He covered the entrance to the tent. My own bayonet was hooked on my pack above the ridgepole and too far away to reach quickly. The rear part of the tent was down, cutting off all means of escape. All these things rapidly whirled through my mind. I realized there was only one thing left, try and talk him out of it. After stalling him for a few minutes, I was very much relieved when several MP's came up over the hill surrounded the tent and placed this marine under arrest. It seems he had been down in the city cutting up the natives, who had reported the incident to the marine police.

January 4, 1924 I celebrated my 23rd birthday at Santiago, and on June 6, there was another reorganization of the marine forces. Thus we became attached to the 69th Company of the Fourth Regiment, and from this time on a slow process of evacuation of the marines was begun.

I was assigned to duty stringing up additional field telephone sets. All such field telephones are connected in a series, and if the line on one of them is open, the others on 7 the same system will not work. When I attempted to install the last one, at the hotel where the commanding officer was billeted, I couldn't find the end of the wire. Thinking it might be strung up with the Dominican telephone lines, I cut in on each of them, only to hear a voice at the other end say, 'Quien hablo', meaning who speaks. This was the Dominican central. I was getting exasperated. It was difficult with my legs curled around the pole to hold myself up. The sun beat down unmercifully, and I had a bad hangover from the night before. I began to swear louder and louder, until I happened to look across the street and saw a marine lieutenant's wife standing on the balcony laughing at my discomfiture. She

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shouted across the street, 'Don't mind me. Get it out of your system.' However, I slid down the pole in a hurry and just then a native from the Dominican Central arrived on the scene and I found they had tucked the end of wire that was missing in a corner on the far side of the street.

There wasn't much to do at Puerto Plata. The occupation was practically at an end and we were just marking time until the date of evacuation. A few weeks before leaving Puerto Plata, hurricane struck the city. We tried to lash things down, but before we could make any headway, the storm was upon us. We dashed for the protection of the one stone building and through the window saw the radio truck and tent go sailing out over the Atlantic.

On January 3, I was honorably discharged from the marine corps, and on January 4, 1925, my 14th birthday, I journeyed to New York, stopping off to see mother at Nyack. Restless and undecided what I wanted to do next, I began to think of joining the Coast Guard.